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Looking Skyward: An Analysis of 'Auguress' by Michael Shewmaker

In 'Auguress' Michael Shewmaker uses potent ironies, diction with a subtle, dark connotation, and creative sentence structure to illustrate that while lofty aspirations and hopes can bring a moment of fulfillment, they can also lead to the dangerous possibility of one never acting on their dreams. This can render one's identity tied to the hypothetical rather than to the tangible elements of the world. This, Shewmaker argues, encourages an unnatural escape from reality where individuals never realize their aspirations. Instead, they spend their days as wistful observers rather than active participants. This passive attitude toward life is highlighted by Shewmaker's use of irony and negative diction; the poem serves as a reminder to shape one's identity around the realistic, not the theoretical.

The ironies Shewmaker uses give this poem a dark, unsettled tone. He paints an image of a woman waiting pensively by her window, eyes fixed towards the sky as she anticipates the timely flight of an airplane. When her clock strikes noon, the woman's whole world becomes enveloped in shadow as the plane flies overhead: "her entire street/ darkens beneath the turbines' hiss" (Shewmaker 8-9). Curiously, noon is not the brightest time of day for her, but the darkest. This ironic twist of nature shows that this woman's joy is not as untainted as it may seem. The plane, the very object of her adoration, is what is causing her world to grow dark. However, she seems to be blissfully unaware of this fact: all the woman is conscious of is how desperately she

wants to experience flying in the plane. This desperation is evident through the specific characterization of this woman. She is not only described as 'impatient' (Shewmaker 2) but Shewmaker also notes that she "fidgets as the garden dims" (Shewmaker 6). The excitement that she is experiencing manifests itself not only emotionally, but physically as well. This all-encompassing shadow draws out Shewmaker's theme of one's desire, if not followed by action, being the means of their failure. If one only focuses on the notion of attaining their goals without making any tangible efforts, they have not actually accomplished anything—they have failed. Shewmaker also hints at the futility of this woman's pursuit by noting that the planes "passing shadows briefly fill/ her empty teacup to its brim" (14-15). A shadow, as I'm sure you are all aware, is merely a formless shape that offers an impression of the actual object. Therefore her being is filled not with realized dreams of flying in a plane, but the two-dimensional idea of them. While a shadow may cause an empty teacup to appear filled, it will in reality leave one feeling unsatisfied. These ironies show that merely toying with the idea of taking action in one's life can be dangerous; one must remember that imaginative longings are simply means to an end, and not the actual goal.

In addition to ironies, Shewmaker also uses precise word choice to hint at a dark tone and reveal the potential hollowness behind this woman's pursuit. The airplanes themselves are personified as large beasts whose "steel bellies drag broad shadows across/ her lawn" (Shewmaker 5). By portraying the planes as living rather than mechanical, Shewmaker gives them a malicious quality. They are no longer simply means of transportation, but actual beings that possess the power to either realize or destroy dreams. This shows the readers the woman's perspective of the plane: a powerful, living entity that is to be feared yet respected. Another example is seen in how the woman imagines the passengers sitting as "rows of smiles as sharp

as scythes” (Shewmaker 13). This unconventional way of describing a smile gives the ominous impression of rows of passengers that are plastic and unrealistic. She imagines them as mannequins, essentially. This woman has become so consumed with her image of how it must be to travel in the plane that she has created a synthetic world that could never be realized. Combining this stark comparison with an alliterative ‘s’ sound additionally helps create an ominous feeling in the readers minds. By drawing parallels with this ‘s’ alliteration and the creature-like description of the plane, Shewmaker depicts the planes as almost snake-like beings who drag their “steel bellies” (Shewmaker 5). This implicitly dark diction helps illustrate the ominous, hidden dangers of rejecting reality and clinging to hypothetical scenarios.

Shewmaker uses the title of this work as well to illustrate the extent to which this woman has put her hopes in the theoretical daydreams. An auger was an ancient Roman “soothsayer and official whose main role was to interpret the will of the gods by studying omens [and] the flight of the birds” (Alchin, “Augers”). Augers put their whole career, their whole identity in looking towards the sky. This woman has done the same. She builds her whole day around watching the planes fly over—it is clearly her highest priority and has become who she is. The readers do not even know this woman’s name. They are only given the most important information about her—she watches the sky. Interestingly, this term is not actually used anywhere in the poem itself. The word floats singularly above the text as a separate entity, much like how the woman, the ‘augress,’ separates herself from reality. By not including a physical description of the woman in the actual poem, the author is actually describing her in great detail. Since Shewmaker describes her solely as an auger, the readers are able to understand how significant and stand-alone that title is to her identity. While it is sometimes easy to dismiss the title of a poem as simply a literary ornament—something to read before getting to the ‘meat’ of the poem,

Shewmaker utilizes this one-word opener to provide the readers with a look into this unnamed woman's mind.

Also, Shewmaker also uses the syntax and sentence structure to draw parallels to this woman's experience while she stares skyward. The opening line of this poem ("The pendulum of her clock keeps perfect time" (Shewmaker 1)) fits perfectly on one line while the rest of the sentences bleed from line to line. This first sentence is precise and planned out—just like she is. The syntax of this particular line also works with the imagery of the clock to emphasize punctuality and routine. The end of the poem also offers insight into this woman's self-perception: "but while their passing shadows briefly fill/ her empty teacup to its brim—she knows (Shewmaker 14-15.)" Not only does this woman *religiously* watch the planes as they come and go, but she believes she knows their destinations. The dash at the very end helps illustrate this as it carries the reader's eyes to the words 'she knows' and beyond, as if pointing towards the empty space that the planes themselves are flying toward (Shewmaker 15). The creative use of sentence structure that Shewmaker uses allows the readers to understand the woman in a more in-depth way, enabling them to relate their own aspirations and dreams to this woman's situation.

In conclusion, Shewmaker portrays this woman as a tragedy, doomed to forever watching the planes while never actually flying in one. Despite this reality, the woman herself is blissfully naïve of this fact. To illustrate this hidden danger, Shewmaker creates a dark tone by combining ironies with intentional uses of negative diction and sentence structure. This poem serves as a warning that while fanciful goals and aspirations can be a successful driving force, one must guard against becoming enamored with these dream-like elements alone and never pursuing the experience itself in reality.

Works Cited

Alchin, Linda. "Auguries." *Roman Empire & Colosseum*. SiteSeen Ltd., n.d. Web. 6 July 2015.

Shewmaker, Michael. "Augures." *Poetry Daily*. Web. 10 September 2015.